

POLITICS AND THE ARTS: AN HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVE.

Professor D. I. Marquand

July 1980

Politics and the Arts: An Historical Perspective

Whatever may be in doubt about the relationship between politics and the arts - and one of my purposes this afternoon is to persuade you that almost everything is in doubt - one generalisation seems safe. The world of the artist, at any rate of the modern artist, is so far removed from that of the politician, at any rate of the modern politician, that mutual incomprehension, suspicion and even hostility are almost inevitable. The first chapter of Jacob Burckhardt's classic history, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, was entitled "The State as a Work of Art". But although it was a brilliant phrase, the thought was misleading. The state has never been a work of art, and cannot be. We sometimes say that politics is an art, not a science; and there is some value in the statement. But by that we mean only that the politician has to proceed by intuition, rather than by deduction from agreed axioms or by induction from controlled experiments. We do not mean - at least, we should not mean - that his aims or procedures have anything in common with the artist's. The artist seeks to realise an individual vision, as absolutely as possible. The politician has to reconcile the inevitably divergent hopes, fears and interests of collectivities; and in such an enterprise absolute success would be a contradiction in terms.

If the politician has a vision at all - and it is dangerous for politicians to have visions - he can realise it only through persuasion, manoeuvre and compromise, which is another way of saying that it will no longer be his vision if it is realised. It is true, of course, that manoeuvre and compromise have often been buttressed by force. But it is equally true that manoeuvre and compromise are always present in the background, even if force dominates the foreground. Not even the most vigilant or bloodthirsty dictator can police all his streets single-handed, or kill all his enemies himself. At the very least, he needs policemen and executioners; and before long the police and the executioners have become interest groups, whose wishes the dictator has to take into account. Not even Burckhardt's Renaissance despots, for that matter not even Hitler or Stalin or Mao Tse Tung in our own day, could in fact treat their subjects like slabs of marble or sheets of blank paper, however strongly they may have wanted to. Even at the zenith of their power, they had to reckon with the possibility of opposition; even when they were not opposed, their plans were often frustrated by the simple cussedness of recalcitrant

humanity. Of course, revolutionary leaders have frequently tried to behave like artists, remodelling an imperfect society to make it fit some preconceived vision. But the point about such exercises is that they invariably fail. Society moves on, but it is moved by the interaction of the groups that compose it, not by the vision of the revolutionary. And if this is true of the Borgias, the Medicis, the Hitlers and the Stalins, it is much more obviously true of the Thatchers, the Carters, the Helmut Schmidts and the Giscard d'Estaings ; the humdrum, visionless but utterly essential power brokers, whose manoeuvres and compromises make it possible for the pluralist democracies of the West to remain pluralist and democratic.

Hence, however, the misunderstanding, suspicion and occasional hostility to which I referred a moment ago. I am not sure whether power brokers can understand artists. Some clearly do, but I suspect that most do not. What seems almost beyond dispute is that artists find it extraordinarily difficult to understand power brokers. To be sure, plenty of artists, including some of the greatest artists who have ever lived, have been captivated by the revolutionary vision of the state re-made as a work of art, or by the corresponding vision of the heroic leader as artist seeking, as Andrew Marvell wrote of Cromwell, to "cast the kingdoms old into another mould". The classic example, I suppose, is Beethoven dedicating the Eroica Symphony to Napoleon, but there is a long list of others - Milton defending the execution of Charles I, David immortalising the murdered Marat, Yeats celebrating the "terrible beauty" of the Easter Rising, Eisenstein commemorating the mutiny on the Battleship Potemkin, Auden seeing in the Spanish Civil War an opportunity to build "the just city". But none of this is surprising. Revolutionary politics are politics as art; the revolutionary vision, at any rate before it has been muddled by contact with reality, is as absolute and as intense as the artist's. By that same token, however, revolutionary politics are not politics as power broking; and politics as power broking are not attractive to the artist. The artist can see himself, or himself as he would like to be, in the charismatic revolutionary leader, transforming a corrupt society into a perfect one by an act of will. He is bored or repelled, and sometimes even shocked, by the power broker unglamorously weaving imperfect compromises out of incompatible demands. The galleries and libraries of Europe are stuffed with artists' tributes to politics as art. Where, outside the pages of Trollope, can you find a convincing and at the same time sympathetic picture of politics as power broking? "Get thee glass eyes", wrote Shakespeare.

"And like a scurvy politician, seem to see the things thou dost not".
Hilaire Belloc, a failed politician himself, was more emphatic:

Here, richly with ridiculous display,
The politician's corpse is laid away.
While all of his acquaintance sneered and slanged.
I wept, for I had longed to see him hanged.

That, rather than Phineas Finn or Plantagenet Palliser, represents the consensus view of the artistic community.

But although the relationship between art and politics - or at any rate, between art and pluralist politics - is bound to be tense and suspicious, it is clearly desirable to keep the tension and suspicion to the minimum, above all in a society in which art depends heavily on public funds. That, I take it, is the purpose of this conference: my role is to see whether an historical perspective can contribute to that purpose, and if so how. I believe that it can, but indirectly rather than directly. In any society in which art is produced, it seems to me, the fact that it is produced will raise four broad questions or sets of questions for society to answer. The answers will, of course, vary from society to society; some societies may not even be aware of the questions, or of the need for answers. But even when the questions are not recognised, they will still have been raised; and even when they are not answered by design they will still be answered by default. I do not believe that history can tell us how to answer them, but it can tell us what answers have been given by others, and in doing so it can help us to avoid giving foolish or dangerous answers ourselves.

What are these questions? The first and most obvious is the question of censorship. According to what criteria, and by what authorities, should works of art be permitted, in the first place to be produced, and secondly to be made available to the public? The second is the question of finance. By what means should artistic production and the artists who engage in it be funded, and what criteria should determine the operation of whatever system is chosen? Next comes the question of availability. Should special policies or machinery be adopted or set up to make works of art available to the public? If so, what form should the policies and machinery take? Fourthly, there is the question of responsibility. To whom is the artist responsible for what he produces? To himself? To society? To God? To his nation? To his customers? To a mixture of all of these? If he is

responsible to anyone in addition to himself, should special arrangements be made to ensure that the responsibility is discharged?

These questions are separate, and have to be answered separately. All the same, it seems to me that, in historical fact even if not in pure logic, there are connections between them. A Stalinist Communist, to take one extreme case, would give a coherent set of answers, all pointing in the same direction and each supporting the other. A Benthamite Liberal, to take another extreme case, would do the same. The crucial question for the Stalinist would be that of responsibility. He would presumably say that the artist is responsible to society or to History, and to the Party as the guardian of society and interpreter of History. Because only the Party can be fully aware of society's needs and History's direction, the artist cannot be left free to discharge that responsibility as he sees fit. Special arrangements are necessary; and they include - this being the Stalinist's answer to the first question - tight and vigilant censorship at every point of the artistic process. For art which is not approved by the Party is ipso facto criminal, "objectively" if not "subjectively". Its production is at least as grave a crime as its dissemination, possibly a graver one. Art approved by the Party, on the other hand, is positively desirable. Its producers are, by definition, state employees, at any rate in effect. After all, all socially desirable producers are state employees. Because of that and because their productions are, by definition, valuable to the Party in its tasks of guarding society and interpreting History, the answer to the second question is that approved art is financed by the state - and financed rather generously at that. Much the same is true of the question of availability. There is no neutral art any more than there are neutral men. Bad art is harmful and wicked, and must be suppressed. Good art is a weapon in the struggle to build the good society. Access to it must therefore be maximised.

Now contrast that set of answers with the Benthamite Liberal's. For him, the crucial question would be the first. He would presumably say that the artist should have an unqualified right to produce what he likes; and that his right to make his productions available to others should be qualified only by their right not to be harmed involuntarily by them. It would not always be easy to apply that answer in practice. A number of questions would sometimes arise, for example over the exploitation of

minors, over the offence caused by pornographic or blasphemous displays and over allegations of character defamation or invasions of privacy. But for the Benthamite Liberal, the principles, at any rate, would be clear - maximum freedom to produce and to disseminate: minimum censorship. For the consistent Benthamite, however, what was sauce for the producing goose would also have to be sauce for the consuming gander. The artists's freedom to produce what he likes would have to be matched by the public's freedom to consume what it likes. And for art, as for any other commodity, the only reliable test of what the public likes would be that of the market. The consumers of art should get what they pay for: no less, and also no more. If the producers are not prepared to produce what the consumers are prepared to pay for, that is a matter for them, not for society. To tax consumers in order to subsidise the production of art which they do not want - and if they wanted it they would pay for it - would be to infringe their freedom as illegitimately as unnecessary censorship infringes the artist's. As with the Stalinist, moreover, the Benthamite Liberal's answers to the third and fourth questions would form part of the same logical structure as his answers to the first two. His answer to the third question would be that no special arrangements should be made to make art available to the public: if the market is not doing the job already, that shows that the public does not want it done. As for the artist's responsibility, clearly he is responsible only to himself. It is no more legitimate to bully or brainwash him into accepting a responsibility to society, or to God, or to the King than it is to prevent him from producing what he wants or from selling what he produces to those who want to buy it. With art as with all other commodities, the only sure way of maximising satisfaction is to rely on the invisible hand of free competition.

I do not suggest that either the Stalinist or the Benthamite liberal set of answers provides accurate guidance to current practice in this or any other liberal democracy. Still less do I suggest that we should change current practice to conform with either the Stalinist or Benthamite liberal model. On the contrary, both models seem to me abhorrent, and to presuppose social and political arrangements which I find equally abhorrent. But however repugnant they may be, they are at least coherent; and because they are coherent, they provide policy makers with clear, easily understood and - at any rate vis-a-vis those who accept the model - defensible guidelines. Our answers do none of this. They are muddled, incoherent and in some respects contradictory; because of this, they are also vacillating and half-hearted.

We reject the Benthamite liberal answers to the second and third questions concerning finance and availability. We do not believe, that is to say, that art should be financed exclusively by the market. We do believe that it is legitimate to tax the public at large, in order to subsidise the production of works of art which only a small minority of the public wishes to consume. Equally, we believe that special arrangements are necessary to make art available to the public, even if - sometimes it almost seems "especially if" - the vast majority of the public shows no disposition to take advantage of them. But although we reject the Benthamite answers to questions two and three, we - or, at any rate, the progressive, enlightened conference-going, Arts-Council-supporting and Arts-Council-supported sections of us - are fiercely Benthamite on questions one and four, concerning censorship and responsibility. The Benthamite liberal principles of minimum censorship and maximum freedom seem to us almost self-evident; to question them is to exclude oneself from the progressive camp and to align oneself with such figures of Gothic reaction as Mrs. Mary Whitehouse, Mr. Ronald Butt and the Festival of Light. By the same token, although a minority believes that the artist should be responsible to his class (provided, of course, that it is the working class), most of us take it for granted that he should be responsible only to himself or to what an earlier generation would have called his "muse". The notion that he should be responsible to society, or to humanity seems to us reactionary or totalitarian or both. The notion that he should be responsible to his God or his country seems so quaint that it is not worth considering.

These answers may well be right. The trouble is that they do not hang together. The Benthamite liberal system, which underlies some of them but which is repudiated by others, was designed to be taken table d'hôte, not a la carte. To mix Benthamite second and third courses with anti-Benthamite hors d'oeuvres and desserts is to risk indigestion, if not food poisoning. In the Benthamite system, freedom for the artist is buttressed by freedom for the consumer: the rejection of any claims which may be made on the artist in the name of society by the rejection of any claims made on society in the name of art. Moreover, the whole system presupposes a market in art, analogous to all other markets. Censorship is objectionable because it is a restraint of trade, illegitimate for the same reasons that other infringements of free trade are illegitimate. It is wrong to stop artists producing and disseminating what they want because that would inhibit the public's freedom to consume what it wants. There is no need for the artist to

acknowledge a responsibility to society because the market in any case makes him, in practice, responsible to his consumers. Sick or vicious or self-indulgent art - art produced solely to épater le bourgeois or to demonstrate the artist's superiority to the rest of us - will not find a market; if it does, that proves that it is acceptable to society after all. Once the market is eliminated from it, however, the Benthamite system falls apart. If art is financed by the state, the Benthamite liberal attitudes to censorship and responsibility are no longer parts of a coherent whole. They may or may not be more attractive than rival attitudes, but they have to be justified separately and anew; and so far, at any rate, no very compelling justification has been produced. They continue to guide us, but only because we cannot think of better guides; and when the decisions that flow from them are questioned - and for reasons I shall come to later I suspect that they will be questioned more and more frequently as time goes on - the defence is all too often halting, unconvinced and unconvincing.

In short, we are in a muddle; and as a result we lack clear answers to the most obvious questions. Should the taxpayer's money be spent on artistic productions which many - or most - taxpayers find offensive? If so, why? Should the state subsidise all such attempts, no matter from what ideological quarter they come? Granted that it is right for the Arts Council to subsidise a satire ridiculing the present Government on the grounds that it consists of members of the Conservative Party, would it also be right to subsidise a satire ridiculing Sir Keith Joseph on the grounds that he is a Jew? If not, why not? If the state has an obligation to make art available to those who would otherwise be denied access to it, why has the artist no obligation to make his own work accessible? Are there any limits to the state's obligation to make art available? Is it, for example, under any obligation to protect art which is, or seems to be, deliberately intended to be esoteric and inaccessible? If not, is it at any rate justified in doing so? If it is not so justified, who is to decide which works of art fall on the right side of the boundary and which on the wrong? The Stalinist and the Benthamite liberal do not even face some of these questions. Those they do face, they find easy to answer. We flounder in a pragmatic bog, hopping from expedient to expedient.

History cannot tell us where to find firm ground, but it can tell us where we lost it. And its most obvious message, it seems to me, is that the loss was more recent than is sometimes supposed. If I am right,

our dilemmas spring from a profound, if only implicit, contradiction between our Benthamite attitudes to the questions of censorship and responsibility and our anti-Benthamite conception of the proper relationship between the artist, the market and the state. But the Benthamite attitudes to all these questions are very recent. For most of the ten thousand or so years since the first cave paintings appeared in what is now the south of France, the notion that the artist should be responsible only to himself or to his genius would have seemed ludicrous, or perverse, or even sacrilegious. The artist was maintained by society to perform a social function. It was a specialised function, of course, but it was still a social one. The cave painter's was probably magical. The medieval stonemason's was religious. The Athenian sculptor's was partly religious and partly political. The baroque court architect's was essentially political. But no matter whether the artist's job was to help the hunters' spears to their target, to glorify God, to impress visitors to the city or to exalt the King, it was not simply to satisfy himself. No doubt the cave painters derived aesthetic satisfaction from their work. No doubt the builders of Chartres Cathedral did the same. But that was not the object of the exercise. In the first case, it was to secure the tribe's food supply and in the second to get time off from Purgatory.

In The Doctor's Dilemma Bernard Shaw depicts the artist hero, Louis Dubedat, as a shiftless, irresponsible, anti-social, lying, sponging genius; and although this is never stated explicitly, there is a clear implication that his genius is the other side of the coin of his lying and sponging. On his deathbed he delivers what the stage direction describes as his creed:

I believe in Michael Angelo, Velasquez and Rembrandt; in the might of design, the mystery of colour, the redemption of all things by Beauty everlasting, and the message of Art that has made these hands blessed. Amen. Amen.

I doubt if Shaw intended that to be taken quite at face value. Dubedat is a congenital liar, and like many congenital liars he deceives himself as well as others. Even on his deathbed he cannot help posturing and playing to the gallery. Like Trotsky, he would be happy to die for the Revolution, provided someone was watching - only in his case it would not be for the Revolution but for Art. But although Shaw is poking fun at him, it is very gentle fun. The real joke is on the pompous, respectable, incompetent doctors, with their phoney science and their ridiculous jargon. They, the

symbols of the self-important, philistine Victorian bourgeoisie, are the enemy. With all his faults, Dubedat is the hero, albeit in some ways an anti-hero. He may be a liar, a con-man and a cheat. He may intoxicate himself with high-sounding rhetoric. His creed may be braggodoccio. But the real point of the play is that it is justified braggodoccio: that when all is said and done Dubedat is a great artist, that great artists are not like other men and that they cannot be expected to obey the rules made for other men. Genius is above the law, a-social if not anti-social. The artist's responsibility is to his art. If he satisfies Michael Angelo, Velasquez and Rembrandt, he is entitled to forget about the rest of us.

Dubedat, it seems to me, belongs exclusively to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He would have been incomprehensible before the eighteenth. To be sure, there are traces of him in Rousseau, or rather traces of Rousseau in him. But Rousseau was an exception. It needed the French Revolution, Napoleon, Byron and the whole Romantic movement to spread Dubedat's conception sufficiently to make him a dramatic possibility. For what Dubedat represents is the artist as alienated genius; and until the Romantics that was not how artists saw themselves or were seen by others. Indeed, the real joke about Dubedat's creed, though it was not seen by Shaw, is that Michael Angelo, Velasquez and Rembrandt would have been as shocked by Dubedat as the doctors were. For Michael Angelo, Velasquez and Rembrandt were not alienated geniuses. Nor were Bach, Handel and Mozart or Shakespeare, Moliere and Racine. They were craftsmen, paid to do a job and doing it as conscientiously as they could. No doubt some artists lied and sponged in the Renaissance or the Middle Ages. Perhaps some of the cave painters did so too. But the point about Dubedat is not that he lies and sponges. It is that he lies and sponges for the sake of his art, and is therefore entitled to do so. I doubt if the Renaissance thought that artists were any more entitled to lie and sponge than cooks or carpenters.

Indeed, as Mr. Peter Burke reminds us in his brilliant Tradition and Innovation in Renaissance Italy, the status of painters and sculptors, at any rate, was not nearly as different from that of cooks or carpenters as highfalutin' nineteenth-century Romantics would have liked to think. Visual artists were mostly of humble birth. Like other craftsmen, they learned their trades as apprentices to masters of the craft, and passed their businesses on to their children. Mr. Burke describes the process thus:

...painters often started young. Andrea del Sarto was seven (says Vasari) when he was apprenticed to a goldsmith. Titian was nine (says Dolce) when he was sent to work in the studio of Sebastiano Zuccato at Venice...Michelangelo was thirteen when he was apprenticed to Ghirlandaio, and Palladio was apprenticed to a stone carver at thirteen. It looks as if Botticelli and Leonardo left things a little late, for Botticelli was still at school when he was thirteen, and Leonardo was about fourteen or fifteen when he was apprenticed...

In general, apprentices would form part of the extended family of their master, living in his house, getting their food and clothes from him. Sometimes the master was paid for his instruction... On other occasions, the master paid the apprentice for his help. When Timoteo Viti entered the studio of Francia, he undertook to work for nothing in the first year; for sixteen florins a quarter in the second year; after this, to be paid piecework rates and to be able to leave when he pleased. Similarly, Michelangelo's contract with the Ghirlandaio workshop laid down that he was to receive 24 florins over three years: six in the first year, eight in the second and ten in the third.

It would be wrong to exaggerate. Even the visual artists were not ordinary craftsmen. They were notorious for irregular working habits, and they often refused to be paid, like other craftsmen, by the day. Writers were not craftsmen at all. They had been to university; and since universities were more expensive than apprenticeship they mostly belonged to a higher social class. But when all the qualifications have been made, the contrast between the world of Louis Dubedat and the world uncovered by Mr. Burke is vast. Mr. Burke's world has no place for the sensitive, lonely, tormented genius of romantic imagining. It is a humdrum, workaday world, in which art is part of life and artists part of society. And by the same token, our problems - which are nearly all, in one way or another, legacies of romanticism - were not problems for it. Of course, the questions I listed earlier had to be answered then just as they have to be answered now; but the answers presented no great difficulty. Like cooks and carpenters, and in essentially the same way as cooks and carpenters, artists were responsible to their customers - sometimes to a prince, sometimes to the Pope, sometimes

to a rich private patron, sometimes to the market which was then beginning to grow up. What was true of responsibility, moreover, was true also of availability and of censorship. Availability is a problem for us because we take it for granted that high art and mass art belong to different spheres, and because we assume (on the whole, correctly) that the masses will not, in practice, have access to the high art of the past or patronise the high art of the present unless something is done to encourage them. I doubt if Mr. Burke's world was conscious of this difference. The high art of the Renaissance might not in practice be available to the masses (though some of it was clearly available to some masses), but it was in principle accessible to them. Giotto's peasant parents may not have seen many of their son's paintings, but if they had they would have been no less able to appreciate them than were noblemen or wealthy merchants. The groundlings who went to Shakespeare's plays may not have appreciated all the subtleties, but they went just the same; and Shakespeare did not think it beneath him to amuse or amaze them. Censorship is obviously a more complicated matter, but I suspect that the same is broadly true even of that. It might present problems to the individual artist or the individual patron. There were furious battles between Michelangelo and the Pope over the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel - Michelangelo refusing to let the Pope see the work till it was finished, and the Pope allegedly disguising himself as one of Michelangelo's workmen so as to take a look. But censorship as such was not a problem for society as such. Patrons commissioned what they wanted to commission, and artists produced what they were commissioned to produce. The concept of the state hardly existed, and the concept of individual, as opposed to communal or social, rights did not exist at all. The notion that the individual's right to free expression might conflict with the State's duty to safeguard the interests of its citizens could therefore not arise.

The world described by Mr. Burke has vanished beyond recall, and there is no point in lamenting it. But although we do not always realise the implications of the fact, the world of the romantics has vanished too. For it must never be forgotten that that world was also the world of Benthamite liberalism: and that the Romantics' exalted view of the artist and his function was underpinned by the structures and assumptions of Benthamite liberalism. It was production for the market which freed the artist from the patron and the prince. It was production for the market which enabled him to claim freedom from censorship and to snap his fingers at older notions of social

responsibility. Production for the market still takes place, of course, but the reason this conference is being held - indeed, the reason that there are arts associations to hold it - is that production for the market no longer suffices to keep art alive. The prince and patron have come back in the shape of the democratic state. But, of course, the democratic state cannot behave like the princes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is, after all, democratic: on some level or other, its decisions are supposed to reflect the popular will. Hence the confusion which now surrounds us - and hence, I believe, the likelihood of greater confusion as time goes on. For there is at best a tension, and at worst a contradiction, between the state's role as patron and its obligation to carry out the popular will. The state has become a patron only because art cannot survive on the market. But the reason why art cannot survive on the market is that too few consumers are prepared to pay for it. By what right, then, does a democratic state levy money from its taxpayers to finance activities which they are not willing to finance themselves, in their capacity as consumers? So far, that question has been dodged. The state has been run, in practice, by a liberal mandarin, predisposed by education and attitude to accept or even welcome the role of patron, and unaccustomed to pay more than lip service to the wishes of a populace which has, on the whole, been happy to defer to it. But that state of affairs, I suggest, is rapidly coming to an end. The populace is no longer willing to defer to the mandarin; and the mandarin is becoming less and less liberal. In these circumstances, it is no longer enough to rely on bluff and fudge. The state's role as patron will have to be justified if it is to continue; and it will have to be justified in terms of a public philosophy capable of winning majority support. That philosophy cannot be Benthamite, for the reasons I have already given. I hope it will not be Stalinist. The alternative, it seems to me, is to create a twentieth-century equivalent of the public philosophy described by Mr. Burke. That will involve an enormous change in the public's view of the artist. It will involve an even bigger change in the artist's view of himself.